

AMERICA'S

# TOWN



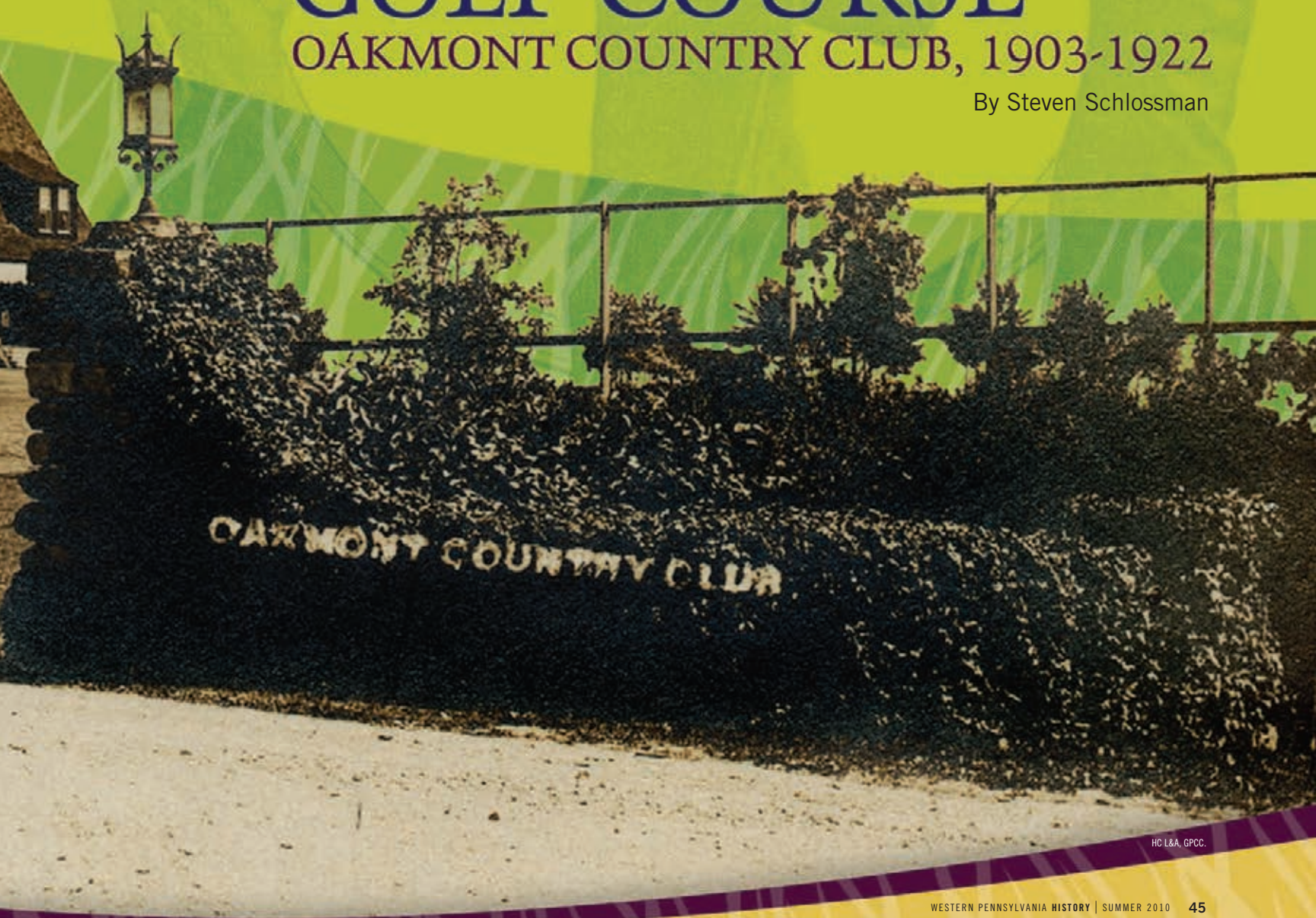


# WEST

## GOLF COURSE

OAKMONT COUNTRY CLUB, 1903-1922

By Steven Schlossman



HC L&A, GPCC.





“It is the **best course** I ever played over.”

- Francis Ouimet, 1919<sup>1</sup>

“It is a perfect golf course and it is the **finest one** I ever played on.”

- Jock Hutchison, 1922<sup>2</sup>

**T**his summer, Oakmont Country Club hosts the U.S. Women's Open—its 10th U.S. Open championship, the most any club has hosted. The United States Golf Association, which has conducted its “National Open” since 1895, undoubtedly believes that Oakmont is a quintessential test of golfing skill. By regularly bringing its premier championship back to Oakmont (eight for men,<sup>3</sup> two for women<sup>4</sup>), the USGA reinforces its claim that the U.S. Open remains America's toughest golf competition. Not all experts agree, but then, they probably aren't aware of how hard Oakmont's founders worked to establish its fearsome reputation.

Oakmont is known above all for its raw difficulty, where a score of par for a round still stands as the standard of excellence. Since its founding in 1903, the course has been the principal exemplar of the “penal school” of golf architecture, whose credo is to test every dimension of skill and severely punish the slightest error. Inevitably, perhaps, Oakmont has always been feared, even revered, by the world's greatest golfers, but rarely loved like such legendary courses as Augusta National and Merion.<sup>5</sup>

Complementing this terrifying portrait of Oakmont as the “Hades of Hulton”<sup>6</sup> has been a celebration of its unchanging character: a strict adherence to the design and

philosophy of its creator, steel magnate Henry Clay (H.C.) Fownes. A case can be made that no great U.S. golf course of its age has deviated as little from its initial physical layout as Oakmont. The tendency of golf writers and broadcasters has been—as was evident many times during NBC's broadcast of the 2007 U.S. Open—to sanctify Oakmont's origins in quasi-religious terms: an immaculate conception, perfect and invariable over time. It was thus not surprising that the National Park Service, in 1987, made Oakmont the first golf course ever designated a National Historic Landmark.

I believe that this interpretation of Oakmont's origins and development contains considerable truth, but it may also be misleading. Too one-dimensionally, I believe, Oakmont's history has been cast as the extended shadow of H.C. Fownes, when in reality, he was not as all-powerful in shaping the future of the course as is commonly believed. Furthermore, the collective mindset that guided the course in its early years was neither rigid nor moored in a blind celebration of the past. Instead, it was adaptive, future-oriented, and attuned to the need for regular modernization in order to build the course's stellar reputation and enhance its unique character. As judged by the actions of those who wielded decisionmaking power, Oakmont was dynamic rather than static; not an immaculate conception but, rather, a work of art in progress.

## The Road to Oakmont's First Major Championship: The 1919 U.S. Amateur

During a nine-year period between 1919 and 1927, Oakmont Country Club put Western Pennsylvania on the world golfing map. The club was selected to host four major championships—two U.S. Amateurs, one U.S. Open, and one PGA—the most concentrated use of a single course in the history of American championship golf (excluding, of course, Augusta National, which hosts the Masters every year). The game's greatest players spoke of Oakmont in the same hushed tones as St. Andrews; some even claimed that Oakmont was tougher.

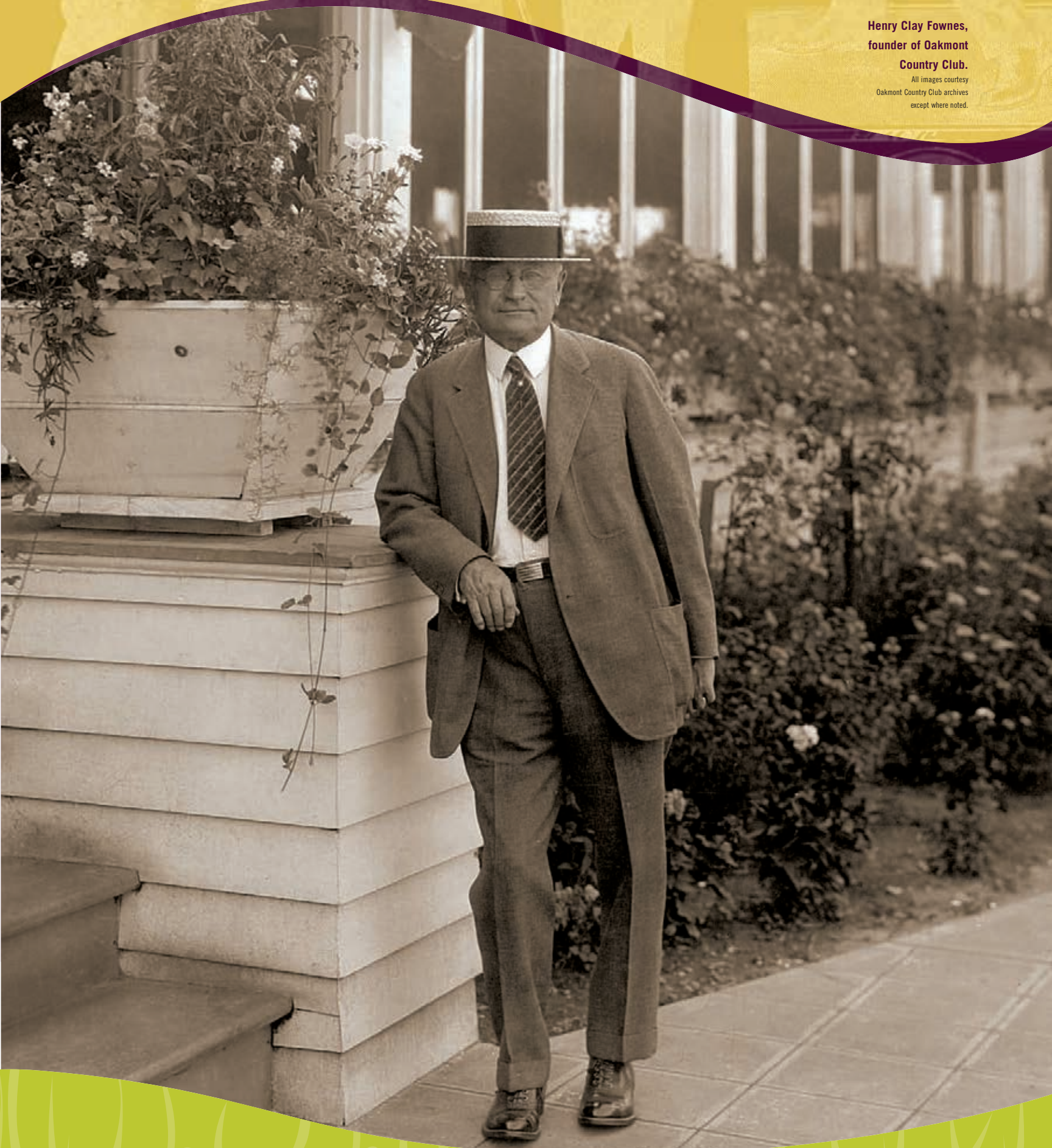
Oakmont's rise to celebrity status in the golfing world began with the U.S. Amateur of 1919. The story of this championship, which I interpret somewhat differently from previous writers, reveals much about the game's growing popularity among Pittsburghers. It also provides an opportunity to demonstrate the centrality of change and reinvention as much as continuity in narrating the club's early history.

Aided by 150 immigrant workmen drawn from nearby steel mills, plus 25 mule teams, H.C. Fownes conceived, financed, and constructed Oakmont Country Club on rolling farmland flanking the Allegheny River between fall 1903 and spring 1904. He intended from day



**Henry Clay Fownes,  
founder of Oakmont  
Country Club.**

*All images courtesy  
Oakmont Country Club archives  
except where noted.*





Henry Clay Fownes observing W.A. Nicholson putting on 18th green at Oakmont, probably late summer 1904.



one that Oakmont would set a new standard of difficulty for golfers in Western Pennsylvania; he also immodestly envisioned that the course would, in time, be recognized as a national proving ground for the world's greatest golfers.<sup>7</sup>

New technologies were central to H.C.'s thinking about modern golf course design. This is demonstrated by the simple fact that Oakmont was one of the first courses built with the "modern" golf ball—that is, the recently invented, farther traveling, rubber-wound or "Haskell" ball—in mind.<sup>8</sup> H.C. was no sentimentalist about the past. As an entrepreneurial iron and steel man who bought,

transformed, and sold businesses with alacrity and hit the jackpot by selling the Carrie Furnace to Andrew Carnegie, he fully understood how new ideas could remake industries overnight. He readily grasped that the new, longer-flying golf ball would transform the game and attract more players to it, including somewhat older players.<sup>9</sup> He therefore built Oakmont 20 to 30 percent longer than other top golf courses of the day: more than 6,400 yards, with only two par-3 holes. His goal at Oakmont was to require even the best players to hit a long and difficult approach shot (generally with a wooden club) on the great majority of holes.

Oakmont was not meant to be a conventional "country club" where business tycoons could rest, smoke cigars, drink brandy, and pursue effortless leisure to recoup energies for the weekly work grind. To H.C., golf was not about "fun" or "relaxation" (at least not in the conventional sense), nor was golf, in his mind, merely a "game." Rather, golf stood preeminently as a test of a man's character, virility, and athletic prowess. H. C. conceived every round of golf at Oakmont as a Darwinian survival of the fittest.

Although H.C. was pivotal in launching Oakmont, his son, William Clark Fownes, Jr. (W.C.),<sup>10</sup> a MIT-trained engineer, was a major power behind the scenes from the start. He

played central roles in both refining his father's original layout and bringing Oakmont to international prominence.<sup>11</sup>

When W.C. returned to Pittsburgh from MIT in 1898 with a degree in chemical engineering,<sup>12</sup> both father and son embraced the game passionately and became quite proficient.<sup>13</sup> They qualified for the seventh U.S. Amateur Championship in 1901, with father beating son by a single stroke in the stroke-play qualifying rounds. They played together as a team, with great success, in numerous interclub tournaments in Western Pennsylvania.

H.C. qualified for four more U.S. Amateur Championships, but only once did he advance far into match play. In 1907, at age 51—following his latest frustrating defeat in the early match play rounds—he decided to withdraw forever from national golf competitions.

That same year he appointed his son to the club's Board of Governors. By this time, W.C.'s golf game was significantly better than his father's.<sup>14</sup> W.C. won the West Penn Amateur title in 1904, 1905, 1907, 1909, 1910, and 1911;<sup>15</sup> most impressively, he defeated Chick Evans and former Olympian Warren Wood to win the 1910 U.S. Amateur title, America's most prestigious golf championship. This victory lifted his profile to an entirely new level on the American golf scene, and

on Oakmont's political scene as well.

In 1911, the year after his son was crowned national champion, H.C. made W.C. chairman of the Grounds Committee, the most powerful post at Oakmont because it controlled the upkeep of the golf course. Essentially, W.C. was given authority to run the whole show, under his dad's nominal oversight.<sup>16</sup> As the golf writer and historian Harry Brownlow Martin candidly put it, "When the elder Fownes became tired of keeping the course up to date, his son...stepped in and took charge."<sup>17</sup>

Take charge is exactly what W.C. did, exuding the "let's make it better" mentality of a scientifically trained engineer. Beginning in the early 1910s and for the next three decades, W.C. began to transform Oakmont, regularly refining but not radically altering the outline of his father's design. He slanted, slickened, and quickened the greens to unheard levels of speed; he also raised and contoured the greens and introduced baffling new undulations that elevated putting into a mental puzzle with missing pieces. He also introduced omnipresent hazards (of all shapes, sizes, and depths) adjacent to the fairways, in the fairways, and surrounding the greens. These included numerous sand bunkers, thickly grassed bunkers and mounds, narrow, overgrown ditches, and vast open pits with god-knows-what at their bottoms. "A shot misplayed should be a shot irrevocably lost," said W.C., who reshaped Oakmont into the archetypal "Hades of Hulton."

W.C. was certainly a visionary, but he did not work alone in revising his father's original design. He relied heavily, perhaps very heavily, on two greenkeepers that he personally hired—John McGlynn in 1911 and Emil Loeffler in 1916—to help shape and implement his ideas. Loeffler, in particular, may deserve as

much credit as W.C. for turning Oakmont into a site worthy of hosting numerous major golf championships.

By the end of 1911, working together, W.C. and McGlynn had achieved a "thorough remodeling of the links"<sup>18</sup> by lengthening holes, digging ditches and pits, and creating and expanding new sand bunkers (the precise number during this era is unclear).<sup>19</sup> They placed the new bunkers immediately adjacent to the fairways and greens, precisely where the shots of expert golfers tended to land. They also built several cross-bunkers in the middle of fairways in order to force longer, higher carries off the tee than many of the top players of the day could comfortably hit.<sup>20</sup>

The new bunkers changed everything. Because of Oakmont's severely sloping fairways, tee shots hit with any sidespin (i.e., a slice or a hook) now tracked inevitably toward the sand. And what sand it was! The bunkers were filled with heavy, dense, occasionally pebble-laden sand from the nearby Allegheny River. To escape from this type of sand required unusual strength and club control (especially before the invention of the sand wedge).

W.C.'s new bunkering of Oakmont inspired both admiration and despair among his golfing friends, one of whom penned the following ditty in 1915:

Bill Fownes stood by a green one day  
When someone holed in four,  
"I'll put a stop to that," said he  
"I'll build two bunkers more."  
And sure enough he built them both  
Where they could sure be seen,  
The first one right before the tee,  
The other on the green.<sup>21</sup>

All in all, the revised course was judged at the end of 1911 to be approximately two or three strokes more difficult than H.C.'s original design—clear testimony to the early and decisive impact of W.C.'s own penal vision.<sup>22</sup>

McGlynn left Oakmont to start his own golf architecture firm in 1916, and his departure enabled W.C. to hire Emil Loeffler as Oakmont's new greenkeeper.<sup>23</sup>

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“Not only are there traps on every hand to catch all but perfect shots, but it is no simple matter to emerge from the said traps.... The Oakmont officials...adopted the system of raking ridges in the bunkers at right angles to the line of play.”

Oakmont in 1922,<sup>30</sup> and golf historians have understandably accepted his word as definitive. But that date

appears to be incorrect. Contemporary newspaper coverage suggests that, in fact, he and Loeffler deployed “furrowed” bunkers fairly widely in 1919 during the U.S. Amateur.<sup>31</sup> As a *New York Times* account described, “Not only are there traps on every hand to catch all but perfect shots, but it is no simple matter to emerge from the said traps.... The Oakmont officials have also adopted the system of raking ridges in the bunkers at right angles to the line of play. This eliminates a lot of luck wherein the old one-way player might find his ball neatly teed up in bunker, while some less fortunate but more erring brother would locate his ball eight inches down in a footprint. This way everything is equal and every lie in a bunker is a bad one.”<sup>32</sup>

The Fownes/Loeffler philosophy underlying the furrowed bunkers was clear.

An exceptionally straight driver of the golf ball himself, W.C. was upset by how readily more expert players had learned to hit lengthy “save” shots with wooden clubs from fairway bunkers—even brassies—almost as easily as they hit from Oakmont’s lush fairways. In W.C.’s eyes, this was heresy: an undermining of the logic of reward and punishment on which he and Loeffler increasingly pinned Oakmont’s future as a regular national championship site.<sup>33</sup>

The “furrowed” bunkers fundamentally reshaped players’ tee-to-green strategies because the players learned very quickly that they could not predictably escape the “furrows” in one or even two shots. A high tee ball that carried a long distance in the air, and then stopped soon

voice throughout the championship.<sup>26</sup> But it was

understood that W.C. was the “architect for the course,” and that “he entrusted the carrying out of his ideas, the building of traps, bunkers and making such as are found there now [*sic*] to Loeffler.”<sup>27</sup>

In tandem, W.C. Fownes, Jr. and Emil Loeffler slowly but surely remade Oakmont. Two notable recent changes to the course itself were clearly evident in 1919. First was the course’s length. The reigning U.S. Amateur and U.S. Open champion, Chick Evans, was startled to learn that the course was playing around 300 yards longer than when he last visited in 1916, with new tees stretching it to more than 6,700 yards. According to Grantland Rice, the nation’s premier sportswriter, Oakmont was now around 500 yards longer than the typical American golf course.<sup>28</sup>

The second major new difficulty introduced to Oakmont in 1919 was the addition of many hazards, not just in number, but in kind. Numerous deep grass bunkers and pits were excavated in time for the U.S. Amateur, and these sometimes took more than a single shot to escape (or required golfers to incur an “unplayable lie” penalty). But the new sand bunkers received the most publicity because few golfers had ever seen anything like them. In the parlance of the time, the bunkers were “corrugated” or “furrowed.”<sup>29</sup>

In later years, W.C. claimed to have introduced “furrowed” sand bunkers to

With Loeffler as his new right-hand man, W.C. prepared to capitalize on an exciting opportunity he had recently negotiated: to host the National Intercollegiate Golf Championship in September 1916.<sup>24</sup> Impressing the collegiate authorities was a shrewd first step that W.C. orchestrated to achieve his ultimate goal of bringing the most prestigious prize in early 20th-century American golf, the U.S. Amateur, to Oakmont.

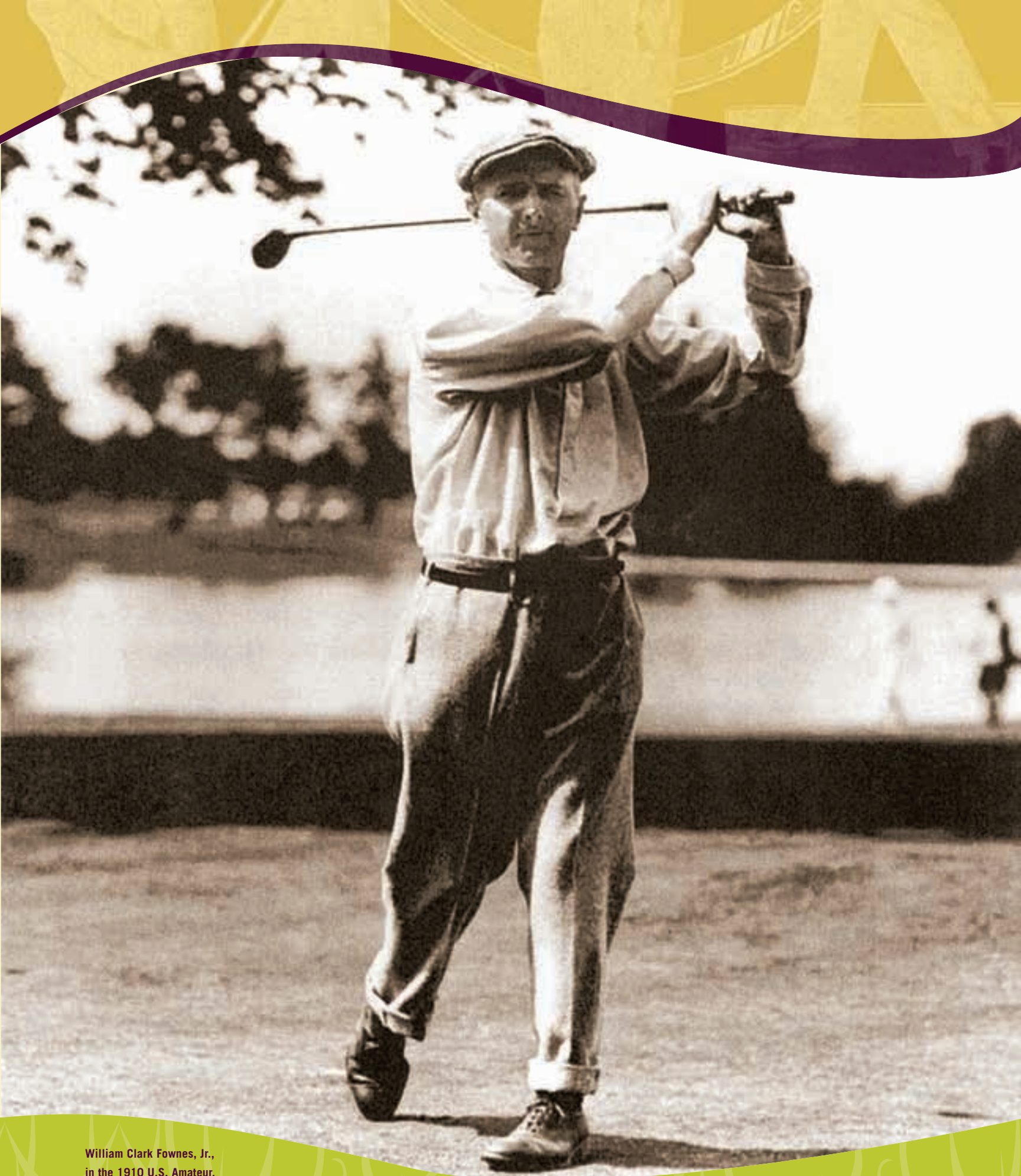
Soon after the collegians returned to school, the good news that the Fownes family had long anticipated finally arrived: the USGA selected Oakmont to host the next U.S. Amateur championship. Having observed a few (only a few) of the collegians score close to par (then 77) during their matches,<sup>25</sup> and knowing that the U.S. Amateur would attract a more talented field than the Intercollegiate, W.C. and Loeffler set to work to stiffen the demands that the course made on players and fully justify its selection as a national championship site.



The entry of the United States into World War I in 1917 “killed competitive play” in American golf for nearly two years, scratching the U.S. Amateur scheduled for Oakmont until August 1919. Because W.C. was a contestant in the 1919 event (indeed, he made it to the semifinals),

Emil Loeffler became the club’s public





William Clark Fownes, Jr.,  
in the 1910 U.S. Amateur.





**Bill Stitt, club secretary  
and manager, and  
Emil Loeffler, greenkeeper.**



**“The mental strain is more severe to the players than the physical....Nightmares and ghastly visions...are haunting the [golfers’] dreams...these somber nightmares and highly speckled visions consist of an endless series of traps, bunkers, pits, and trouble in general for any golfer who is slogging his way around.”**

after landing, now became essential in order to keep drives regularly in the fairway. As Rice concluded, “The low tee shot with the hook for a run spells constant trouble.”<sup>34</sup>

Oakmont’s distinct challenges took some getting used to, but players and journalists alike were excited that the course embodied something unique in American golf. A reporter for *The New York Times* observed that Oakmont was “without a shade of doubt the longest and finest test of golf that has ever been used for a national championship in this country. [The favorites] are in ecstasies over the difficult shot requirements, and the average duffers stand agape at the distances to be covered against the multiplicity of yawning traps. There is not a let up from the first tee to the last green. If a shot is lost, it is gone forever.”<sup>35</sup>

Interviews with the nation’s top amateurs confirmed the journalists’ judgment. Oakmont was “the finest course over which a championship has ever been played in this country,” said John G. Anderson.<sup>36</sup> “It is truly a championship course.” Francis Ouimet, the revered victor over Vardon and Ray at the world-famous 1913 U.S. Open championship, was equally emphatic. “It is the best course I ever played over. The fairways and the greens are faultless...you have a championship course here.”<sup>37</sup>

Both the players and writers made a special point of insisting that while Oakmont was highly penal, it was fair; the course was not “tricked-up.” “It affords a fine test of golf, penalizes poor shots and rewards good ones,” said Ouimet.<sup>38</sup> A local reporter expanded the point, writing, “While it is a difficult course it is not a tricky or unfair one and all that the player must do is to place his shots accurately.”<sup>39</sup>

Grantland Rice concurred,

“There is nothing tricky, unfair or mysterious about the course. It is merely a sheer and rugged test of golf where wood and iron must play their part in order to score.”<sup>40</sup>

Rice, as the nation’s premier sportswriter, probed most deeply into the players’ mindset and offered the clearest comparisons between Oakmont and its peers. Forget about the new “par” of 73, Rice advised; it would take “exceptionally good golf” to break 80 because Oakmont was taking a heavy toll on players’ minds.

“There is a hard psychological test in the Oakmont course, and the mental strain is more severe to the players than the physical,” he observed. “Nightmares and ghastly visions...are haunting the [golfers’] dreams...these somber nightmares and highly speckled visions consist of an endless series of traps, bunkers, pits, and trouble in general for any golfer who is slogging his way around...and not hitting each and every shot as each and every shot ought to be hit.”<sup>41</sup>

Was Oakmont already the toughest golf links in America? Rice addressed the question directly: The only serious competitor, in his view, was the mighty National Golf Links of America in Long Island. “Golfers who have played both courses pronounce it fully as difficult as the [N]ational on a windy day and a few believe it is a harder test.”<sup>42</sup> And after observing several practice rounds at Oakmont, Rice concluded, “There is not a player entered in the

tournament who will not say that it is the most difficult course in America.”<sup>43</sup>

On the eve of its first major championship, Oakmont had already been launched into the pantheon of American golf courses. The acclaim bolstered the confidence of W.C. and Loeffler that their changes were making the course better and better. It also stiffened their resolve to make an ever-escalating penalty—well beyond what H.C. Fownes had initially envisioned—the essence of Oakmont’s unique golfing identity.

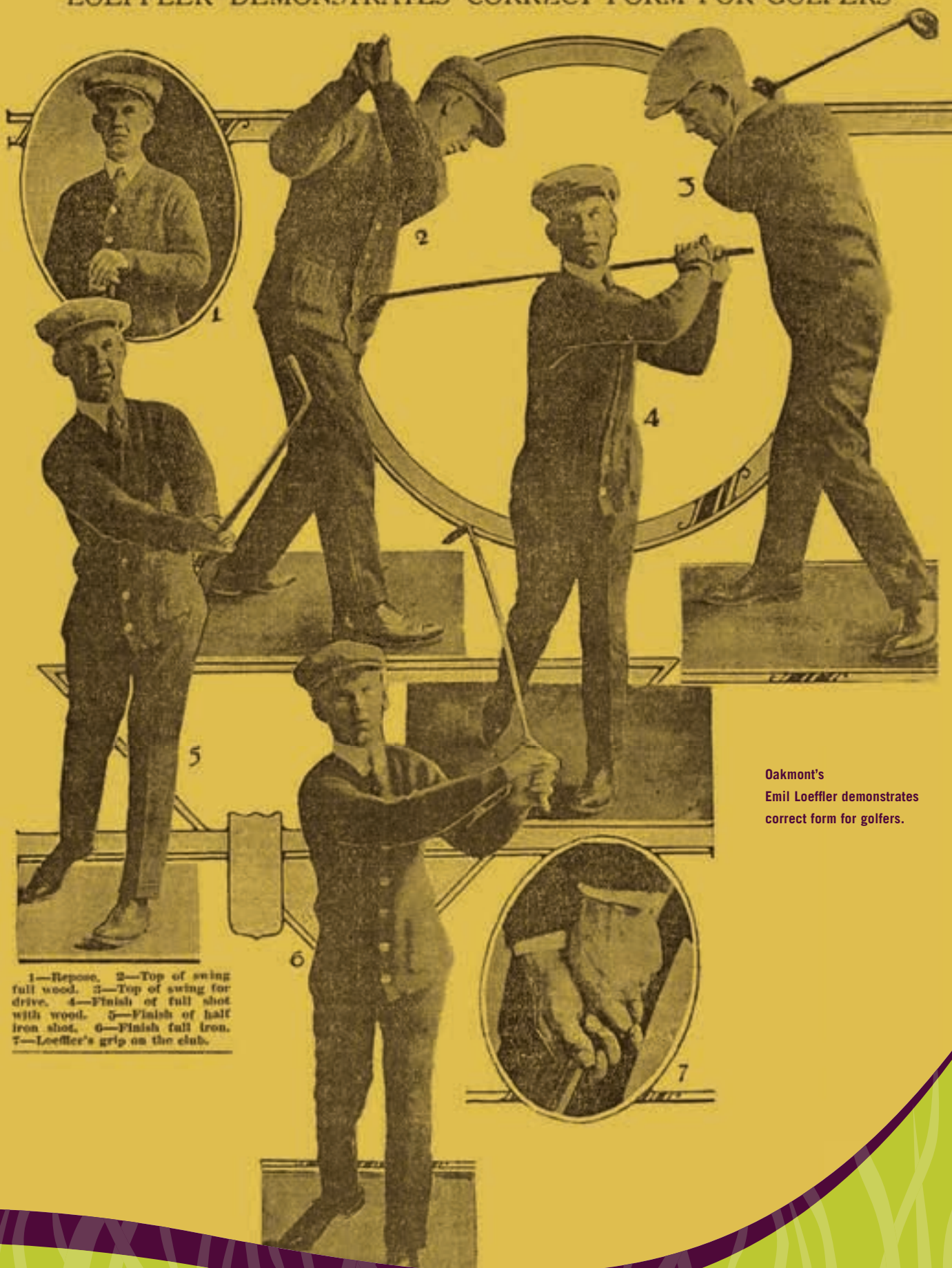


As the 1919 U.S. Amateur got underway, most fans believed that the four champions who had won eight of the last 10 Amateur titles would survive until the semifinal rounds.<sup>44</sup> Chick Evans, Jerry Travers, Robert Gardner, and Francis Ouimet. The other contestant who received considerable press attention was the schoolboy Bobby Jones, who had shocked the golfing world three years earlier at Merion by reaching the semifinals of the Amateur at age 14.<sup>45</sup>

Entirely forgotten in the pre-tournament hype was S. Davidson Herron, the son of a club member, who, three years earlier as a Princetonian during the Intercollegiate, had demonstrated a special knack for playing Oakmont well by winning the stroke-play qualifying round. Impressively, Herron also



## LOEFFLER DEMONSTRATES CORRECT FORM FOR GOLFERS



Oakmont's  
Emil Loeffler demonstrates  
correct form for golfers.



won the medal qualifying round during the 1919 Amateur,<sup>46</sup> but commentators still tended to ignore his game and instead lampooned his considerable heft, one stating that “after hitting the ball a 200-pound crack every time... he still has enough left to ballast an ocean-going blimp.”<sup>47</sup> No one considered Herron a contender for the Amateur crown.

During the first several rounds of match play, even though (while drubbing several no-name opponents) he consistently shot closer to par than anyone in the field, Herron’s mastery of Oakmont continued to be ignored by the press.<sup>48</sup> The banner headlines went to Ouimet, who ignored his doctor’s pleas and continued to play despite appearing on the verge of physical collapse,<sup>49</sup> and to Jones, who was not scoring well but was intimidating opponents by hitting drives “far and straight, with no apparent effort at all.”<sup>50</sup>

But journalists’ perceptions changed by the time of the semifinals, as Herron soundly defeated prominent Philadelphian J. Wood Platt by shooting par 37 on the front nine in the afternoon. As they finally

acknowledged, Herron was “turning in the best cards of the week in winning his matches” and getting “terrific distances from the tee” too. All things considered, concluded a reporter for the *Pittsburgh Press*, “Herron has the advantage [over Jones, who defeated W.C. Fownes in his semifinals match] of playing over his home course and is being strongly favored now because of his steady, consistent playing throughout the tournament.”<sup>51</sup>

As odd as this judgment may seem today, only a seer in 1919 who knew that Jones would emerge several years later as one of the greatest golfers in history would have predicted differently. Had Herron lost to 17-year-old Jones, now *that* would have been an upset.

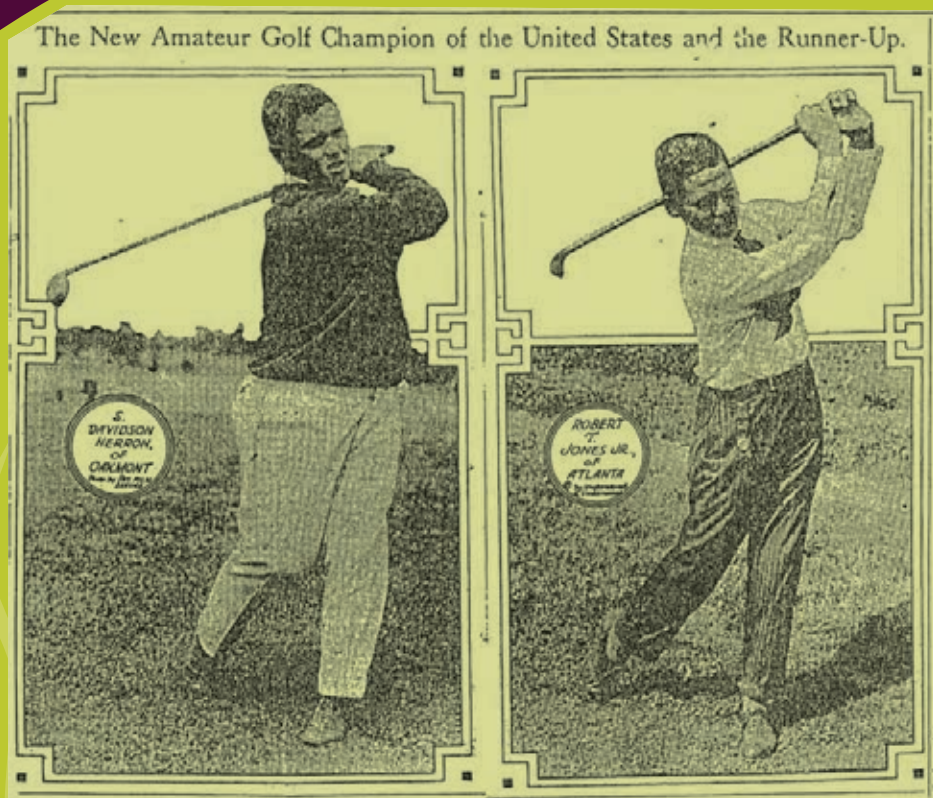
In fact, Herron did defeat Jones decisively to win the 1919 U.S. Amateur by a score of 5 & 4 (i.e., he won five holes more than Jones with only four holes left to play). But Herron’s victory has been cheapened in the historical record by assertions at the time and ever since that he won unfairly because of the infamous “megaphone incident.” Briefly, the claim is that Jones lost

the 12th hole of the afternoon round, and ultimately lost the match, only because of a very poor shot that he hit following a sudden burst of sound when a marshal standing close to him shouted for a distant spectator at the green to stand still.<sup>52</sup>

Is the claim fair? Would Jones clearly have defeated Herron if the megaphone incident had not occurred, and if he had won rather than lost the 12th hole? Obviously, no one can say definitively, but the best answer, I believe, is no.

First, Herron was already 3-up on Jones after the 11th hole. Second, to the surprise of many, Herron was proving at least the equal of Jones off the tee in driving the ball far and straight in the fairways. Third, despite several spirited comeback attempts by Jones to overcome a slow start, Herron had fought off each one; in fact, after Jones’s most recent comeback effort, Herron had expanded his lead. And fourth, Herron putted spectacularly throughout the championship, perhaps as only a player with intimate knowledge of Oakmont’s greens could do. He canned several par and bogey saves from distances as long as 25 feet. Jones was undeniably the greatest putter in the game, but at Oakmont Herron was equally good.

1919 U.S. Amateur Champion  
S. Davidson Herron and Runner-up Bobby Jones.



Chubby and cherubic, sweating profusely, and possessing a **hard, slashing swing** that average golfers could identify with, Davey Herron became a local hero.



“Primed to the smallest blade of grass, combed and curried until it is **without a flaw**, the course...is the nearest thing to golf course perfection that the trained hands of some two score workmen can make it.”

green” to go  
five holes down with

five to play.<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, I would contend, there was a fifth factor, no less key in shaping the final outcome: Herron’s hometown advantage. Just as when he had competed successfully at the Intercollegiate in 1916, Herron played in 1919 before family, friends, and (to the surprise of some who did not realize how popular a sport golf was becoming<sup>53</sup>) a corps of loud and chauvinistic Pittsburgh fans. Chubby and cherubic, sweating profusely, and possessing a hard, slashing swing that average golfers could identify with, Davey Herron became a very popular local hero the week of the U.S. Amateur. Herron’s survival into the final match against the renowned youngster Jones attracted a motley crew of Pittsburghers who didn’t know much about golf, but defiantly wanted to see the local kid win.

Throughout the week, the galleries at Oakmont were much larger than the USGA had anticipated.<sup>54</sup> The crowds were also younger and more socially diverse, reflecting Pittsburgh’s remarkable ethnic heterogeneity and the game’s growing democratization during and after World War I. These fans were not well acquainted with the game’s rules of etiquette, especially the need for strict quiet and stillness before each player hit his shot. The crowds throughout the week were highly undisciplined; not until several years later were ropes used at the Amateur to contain their movements. They stampeded en masse across the fairways, through the bunkers, and even across the greens in order to get into perfect position to watch upcoming shots.

The galleries for the Jones-Herron match were larger than ever before at a U.S. Amateur, several thousand strong. And their partisanship was vociferous; they cheered without mercy for one of their own against the much-lauded southern teen. “About the only rooters in the gallery for the southern chap were his father and Stewart Maiden, the pro who taught the youngster how to play golf,”<sup>55</sup> observed a sympathetic local reporter. The galleries ran ahead and completely surrounded the greens following the players’ approach shots, often making it difficult for them to walk onto the greens. As a New York writer recounted, “After meeting an impenetrable human wall around one of the greens, Bob Jones had to call out ‘Excuse me, please, I’d like to do a little putting on that green.’”<sup>56</sup>

On a terrifically hot day, with Herron “bathed in perspiration from start to finish,” the gallery ran wildly after each of Herron’s shots and fought for position to see his next one. “‘Get back there; get back there,’ roared an excited official through a megaphone. ‘Davie’s in the rough, and we want to give him every chance for the hole.’” To which one of the rare Jones supporters responded, “‘While you’re about it, give Jones a chance, too.’”<sup>57</sup>

In a deep breach of golf etiquette, the Pittsburgh fans also applauded loudly when Jones hit poor shots and missed putts. As Herron marched toward victory on the afternoon back nine, the gallery did all it collectively could to rub salt into Jones’s wounds. “Some of the younger and irrepressible element thought it was ‘de rigueur’ to give...rousing cheers when young Robbie, 4 down and only 6 to play, pitched from one trap into another at the thirteenth

Herron’s hometown advantage at Oakmont, in short, was quite real. He played the recently toughened Fownes/Loeffler course better than anyone all week, and in the final match against Jones, Pittsburghers did their part to ensure that the local guy won. While Herron’s triumph is rightly viewed one of the most unexpected victories in American championship golf, the “megaphone incident,” in perspective, seems little more than incidental to understanding who won and why.

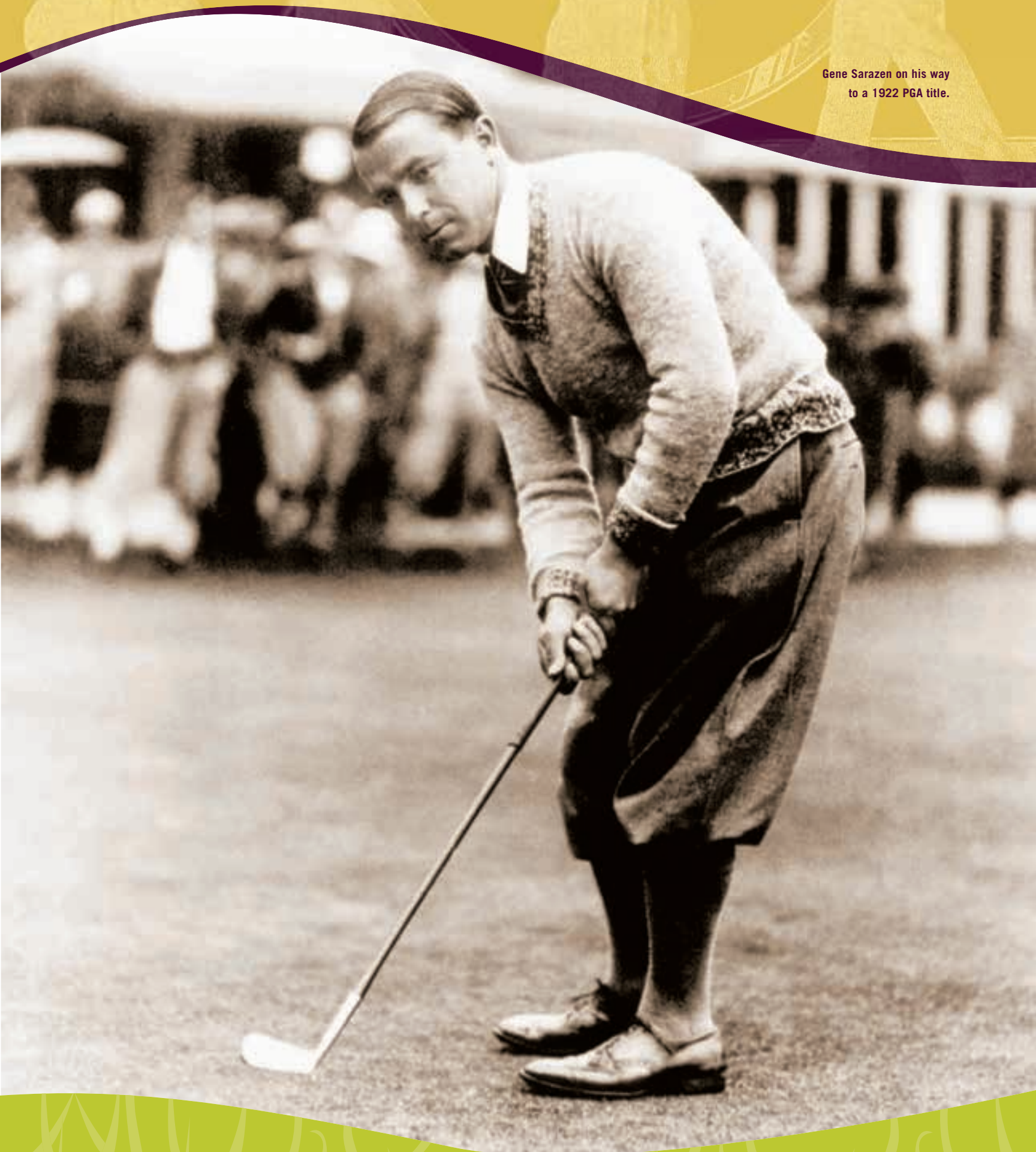
### Oakmont’s Second Major Championship: the 1922 PGA Championship

Oakmont itself, not Davey Herron’s victory, was the memory that stuck most in the minds of America’s golfing elite following the 1919 U.S. Amateur. “Never in the history of golf in this country had the championship been played on a course in such fine shape,”<sup>59</sup> the USGA wrote to Loeffler in grateful appreciation. Apart from completing their retooling of the greens, W.C. and Loeffler had no compelling incentive to further toughen a course that, in everyone’s judgment, already set a new standard of penalty. When Oakmont agreed to host its second major championship, the 1922 PGA, W.C. and Loeffler only felt it necessary to add a few grass and “furrowed” sand bunkers. Otherwise, the course that the pros played in 1922 remained largely as it was in 1919.

As the PGA got underway, the golf journalists again saluted the design and conditioning of Oakmont, and effusively praised W.C. and Loeffler. “Primed to the smallest blade of grass, combed and



Gene Sarazen on his way  
to a 1922 PGA title.







Gene Sarazen and William Clark Fownes, Jr., after Sarazen's 1922 PGA victory.

curried until it is without a flaw, the course...is the nearest thing to golf course perfection that the trained hands of some two score workmen can make it," observed the *Pittsburgh Post*. "Behind its perfection is the master mind of Fownes and the master hand of Loeffler. These two have made the course and kept it, and the professional golfer who carries away the prize that is emblematic of the championship can well say he has won it over a course that is second to none in the whole world."<sup>60</sup> In a widely repeated turn of phrase, Oakmont was proclaimed a "golfer's paradise and a duffer's hell."<sup>61</sup>

As opening day approached, the most widely expressed concern was that lack of rain had baked Oakmont's fairways, thereby enabling professionals to hit unusually long tee shots and considerably shorten most holes.<sup>62</sup> Drives of over 300 yards were commonplace; even the 601-yard 12th hole was reachable for the longer hitters (although few actually did so). And with Loeffler nervously watering the greens periodically to keep them from ruin, the pros took advantage of both the hard fairways and the inviting greens to make a mockery of Oakmont's heralded toughness.

Much to W.C.'s and Loeffler's horror, the pros regularly shot under par during their matches<sup>63</sup>—oftentimes several shots under par. Twenty-year-old Gene Sarazen led the pack, shaving five, six, even seven shots off par as he defeated opponents.<sup>64</sup>

During the quarterfinals, after a poor start, Sarazen played 27 holes in 8-under par before downing Jock Hutchison in a thriller with a birdie on the 35th hole. When Oakmont played short, it could easily be had by the world's best professional golfers.

Sarazen continued to demolish par during his semifinal match against Bobby Cruickshank, shooting a record-setting 32 on the front nine, including an eagle 3 on the



ninth hole following a huge, rolling tee shot of 325 yards. Cruickshank shot 1-under par on the front side, yet found himself 4 down.

The next day, Sarazen and Emmet French played for the championship. Both showed signs of fatigue under the burning sun, and neither played as well as he had previously. Ultimately, it was Sarazen's greater familiarity with the greens that gave him the victory, as he had 13 1-putts and only one 3-putt before closing out French, 4 & 3.

The way the professionals tore up Oakmont during the 1922 PGA was a stern lesson that both W.C. and Loeffler took to heart. As they saw it, recent technological improvements in clubs and balls, plus rising skill levels and rapid expansion in the corps of professional players, required a serious toughening of the Oakmont layout if the course were to retain its recently earned international stature. When the next major championship came to Oakmont, there was no doubt in their minds that major changes would have to be made in order to reinstate Oakmont's "par" as an indisputable standard of excellence. As the pros left town, one could almost hear W.C. Fownes, Jr. and Emil Loeffler say, "Never again."

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, August 15, 1919.

<sup>2</sup> *Pittsburgh Press*, August 14, 1919.

<sup>3</sup> 1927, 1935, 1953, 1962, 1973, 1983, 1994, 2007. Oakmont is next scheduled to host a men's U.S. Open championship in 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The only previous Women's Open was held in 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey S. Cornish and Ronald E. Whitten, *The Golf Course* (New York: The Rutledge Press, 1981), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> The first and second holes border Hulton Road, also the train stop where early club members, nearly all from Pittsburgh, commuted to Oakmont along the Allegheny River via the Buffalo Flyer Express.

<sup>7</sup> H.C.'s larger aspirations were immediately recognized. At the club's formal opening in October 1904 (many local competitions had already been contested there over the summer), the *Pittsburgh Gazette* noted: "The event was ... of sufficient importance as to have national consequence as it is very much within the probabilities that more than one tournament for the national championship will be decided there." Quoted in Edward B. Foote, *Oakmont Country Club: The First Seventy-Seven Years* (Oakmont, PA: Oakmont Country Club, 1980), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Coburn Haskell of Cleveland invented the new rubber-wound golf ball in 1898. It was more durable, flew straighter, and, most importantly, even average players could hit it at least 20 yards farther than the previous generation of golf balls made from gutta percha.

<sup>9</sup> H.C. first started playing at age 41.

<sup>10</sup> Confusingly, W.C. was named after his father's younger brother, William Clark Fownes. H.C. added the "Jr." to W.C.'s name to try to clarify (rather unsuccessfully) who was who.

<sup>11</sup> For a different take on the dominance of H. C. Fownes in shaping Oakmont's future, see Marino Parascenzo, *Oakmont 100 Years* (Pittsburgh: Fownes

Foundation in cooperation with the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 2003), 2-36.

<sup>12</sup> As was commonplace with the male children of Pittsburgh's industrial elite, W.C. began his immersion in the family business with a two-year stint at the bottom rungs of a steel mill in order to groom him for leadership.

<sup>13</sup> H.C. was scarcely 21 when W.C. was born; the father-son bond had elements of a big brother/little brother rivalry, including spirited athletic contests. H.C. and W.C. learned the game around the same time, in the late 1890s. W.C. may even have helped his father design the course in 1903. He was an original stockholder in the business entity his father created in 1903 to finance Oakmont.

<sup>14</sup> And by 1907 he was a tycoon on his own as the well-paid secretary of Midland Steel. Arguably, he had achieved enough of a golf and business identity to justify H.C.'s decision to place him on the board at the young age of 31.

<sup>15</sup> He also won the 1904 Western Pennsylvania Open championship (held at Oakmont) and, beginning in 1905, was chosen to represent Pennsylvania in the prestigious Lesley Cup, which matched the top amateurs of the Keystone State against their counterparts in the golf havens of New York and Massachusetts.

<sup>16</sup> W.C. may also have had considerable time to devote to the golf course after the family sold off Midland Steel for a fabulous profit in 1911.

<sup>17</sup> H. B. Martin, *Fifty Years of American Golf* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1936), p. 338.

<sup>18</sup> *The New York Times*, December 15, 1915.

<sup>19</sup> Unlike the famous "pot bunkers" in Scottish and other courses in the British Isles, all of Oakmont's bunkers had to be built shallow because the course's clay base would not properly drain a deep bunker.

<sup>20</sup> The early 20th century was a low-ball era in American as well as in British links golf; players sought to run shots as long a distance as possible along unirrigated fairways.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Foote, *Oakmont Country Club*, 11-12. In addition, Fownes started a ditch-digging program along several fairways, such as the short par-4 second and the long par-5 ninth holes. While the ditches facilitated course drainage, they were also built to exact severe punishment for errant tee shots—worse punishment, in fact, than the bunkers.

<sup>22</sup> Foote, *Oakmont Country Club*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> W.C. had known Loeffler (born 1895) since early childhood. His father was Oakmont's chief machinist and Emil virtually grew up on the golf course. He was W.C.'s caddie, at age 8, in the first foursome ever to play Oakmont in 1904, and he served as W.C.'s main caddie during the years when W.C. matured into a championship player. By close observation of W.C. and other top players at Oakmont, Loeffler learned to play the game superbly; he found endless opportunities to "sneak" onto the course and practice when no one was looking.

<sup>24</sup> While the Intercollegiate did not hold nearly the prestige of an event sponsored by the USGA (which conducted both the U.S. Amateur and the U.S. Open), the best college players of the time were mainly Ivy Leaguers, and many of their families had close USGA ties.

Much to W.C.'s and Loeffler's horror, the pros regularly shot under par during their matches—oftentimes several shots under par. Gene Sarazen led the pack, shaving five, six, even seven shots off par.



# When the next major championship came to Oakmont, there was no doubt...that major changes would have to be made...

<sup>25</sup> Most of the collegians, however, found Oakmont to be unrelenting in its demands for consistently perfect play. As a local reporter observed: "On the Oakmont course the player gets what he plays for. The player who drives straight has no trouble, but woe to the one who is wild from the tee, the penalties for misplayed shots being severe." *Pittsburgh Post*, September 10, 1916.

<sup>26</sup> The war affected Oakmont most directly when Loeffler enlisted in the American Expeditionary Forces in spring 1918, was shipped to Europe, and did not return to civilian status until June 1919—after some special pleading by Oakmonters that stressed his key role as greenkeeper for the U.S. Amateur in August. After returning to Pittsburgh, Loeffler "worked day and night in getting the course into condition," observed a local reporter. "If any person is entitled to credit for the fine condition the Oakmont course is in, it is Loeffler, who, even before he went into the army, worked hard in anticipation of the coming tournament, and all the more so since his return home from France." *Pittsburgh Post*, August 11, 1919.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, August 17, 1919; *The New York Times*, August 17, 1919. The added yardage, combined with the luxuriance of the fairways, made Oakmont play exceptionally long except for all but the strongest drivers. "One thing about the Oakmont course," said a recent first-time visitor, "is that you do not get any long rolls on the drives. The turf is velvety and springy and is not hard and baked as some of the courses over which the National championship has been determined in recent years, and the players get the distance they hit for." *Pittsburgh Post*, August 11, 1919. Grantland Rice agreed, especially after rains slowed down the fairways even more than usual: "There will be no baked out fairways for any 300-yard drives....the second shot in a majority of cases [calls] for anything from a full iron to a brassie [2-wood] wallop. There are few mashie [5-iron] approaches required, most of the second shot distances being beyond any mashie range." *New York Tribune*, August 14, 1919.

<sup>29</sup> In the 1920s, the "furrows" would also be referred to as "marcel waves" in reference to a modern hairstyle very popular among young women during the Roaring Twenties.

<sup>30</sup> In 1922, Oakmont hosted its first PGA Championship (it would later host two more, in 1951 and 1978).

<sup>31</sup> In fact, some evidence suggests that W.C. and Loeffler experimented with "corrugated" bunkers during the 1916 Intercollegiate championship. See *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 10, 1916. The more important point for now is that "furrowed" bunkers became part and parcel of Oakmont's distinct identity in 1919, not in 1922.

<sup>32</sup> *The New York Times*, August 17, 1919. To "corrugate" the sand, Loeffler used a very heavy, specially designed rake (probably built by his father, the course machinist) with three-inch prongs, weighted at the neck with a 100-pound slab of iron

to ensure that the furrows were deeply grooved. Relying on the unusually heavy Allegheny River sand to hold their shape, the "furrows" were erected across the entire length of the bunker. They were dug two inches wide and two inches deep, so as to hold a ball securely between the ridges or, less often, poised on the ridges themselves. Either way, extracting one's ball from this kind of entrapment—especially from a fairway bunker—exacted a penalty both more predictable and more severe than that faced in flat, shallow, smoothly raked bunkers. Ron Whitten, "Putting the 'Oh!' in Oakmont," *Golf World*, June 10, 2007, 80, 82.

<sup>33</sup> Players, not surprisingly, were less positive about the innovation. One was the Chicagoan Robert Gardner, a two-time U.S. Amateur champion, whose ball landed in a corner of a trap. "Gardner had one bit of luck that he boasted about. In the fifth hole he found his tee shot in a not unusual position at the bottom of a sand trap, but instead of the regular ridges that are a feature of the Oakmont traps, this was perfectly smooth and the Chicago golfer played a perfect shot to the green. 'Ha,' he said as he climbed triumphantly out of the pit, 'at least I got to a trap before that fellow with his trick rake.'" *The New York Times*, August 17, 1919.

<sup>34</sup> *New York Tribune*, August 17, 1919. A *New York Times* reporter believed that this unique feature of the course played to the advantage of the long-hitting contestants from the New York metropolitan area: All hit "a long high ball with little run, [which] is well adapted to avoid disaster on this most troublesome of courses." *The New York Times*, August 17, 1919.

<sup>35</sup> *The New York Times*, August 18, 1919.

<sup>36</sup> Anderson was the perennial amateur champion of Massachusetts and a two-time runner-up for the U.S. Amateur.

<sup>37</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, August 15, 1919.

<sup>38</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, August 15, 1919.

<sup>39</sup> *Pittsburgh Press*, August 17, 1919.

<sup>40</sup> *New York Tribune*, August 15, 1919.

<sup>41</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, August 18, 1919 and August 15, 1919.

<sup>42</sup> *New York Tribune*, August 17, 1919.

<sup>43</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, August 18, 1919.

<sup>44</sup> The U.S. Amateur was contested at match play, not stroke play.

<sup>45</sup> Jones expressed a strong desire to win at Oakmont to become the first southerner to claim the U.S. Amateur crown. *The New York Times*, August 23, 1919. Jones had built on the reputation he established in 1914 by competing during the war in exhibition matches against established amateur and professional stars in order to raise money for the troops.

<sup>46</sup> The qualifying round was played in harsh rain, wind, and even hailstones; as a result, Herron's victory was largely dismissed as a fluke of the weather. *New York Tribune*, August 17, 1919.

<sup>47</sup> *The New York Times*, August 23, 1919.

<sup>48</sup> *The New York Times*, August 20, 1919 and August 21, 1919.

<sup>49</sup> *Pittsburgh Press*, August 17, 1919.

<sup>50</sup> *The New York Times*, August 23, 1919.

<sup>51</sup> *Pittsburgh Press*, August 23, 1919.

<sup>52</sup> More precisely, on the par-5 12th hole, after Herron had already hit a poor drive and second shot that made it unlikely he would be able to score par, Jones topped his second shot from a perfect lie in the fairway into the infamous cross-bunker, where he drew a poor lie amidst the furrows and could not extract himself after several flailing tries.

<sup>53</sup> George B. Kirsch, *Golf in America* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> The USGA's low estimates were based on fan turn-out data during the last pre-war championship in 1916. Somewhat surprisingly, even though the major golf championships were suspended during World War I, the game itself appeared to grow substantially in popularity between 1917 and 1919.

<sup>55</sup> *Pittsburgh Press*, August 24, 1919.

<sup>56</sup> *The New York Times*, August 24, 1919.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Pittsburgh Press*, August 9, 1922.

<sup>60</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, August 13, 1922. Lest this opinion be dismissed as local boosterism, two-time major champion Jock Hutchison confirmed that the professionals agreed: "It is a perfect golf course and it is the finest one I ever played on," Hutchison said after his first two practice rounds. *Pittsburgh Press*, August 12, 1922.

<sup>61</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, August 14, 1922.

<sup>62</sup> "The players are getting long rolls on their drives as a result of the fairways being hard," noted one observer. "With the fairways softened up it would serve as a better test of golf, as it would lengthen the course and the players would have to depend on their carry for their distance." *Pittsburgh Press*, August 15, 1922.

<sup>63</sup> At this time, the PGA was contested at match play, and most of the matches theoretically required 36 holes to complete.

<sup>64</sup> The recent U.S. Open winner, Sarazen was also a regular playing companion of Loeffler and W.C. Fownes, Jr., at Oakmont and, apart from Loeffler (who advanced to the quarterfinals), knew Oakmont better than anyone else in the field.



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